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Was Another Modernisation Possible? Liberal and Leftist Critique of the Transformation in the Public Debate in Poland

Abstract: The article regards the public debate focusing on the assessment of the political transformation and the model of modernisation implemented in Poland after 1989. In recent years, the conservative and right-wing criticism, which focused on pro-Western modernisation and the liberal discourse of transformational success, is more and more often accompanied with self-criticising statements uttered by the former liberal leaders of the democratic transformation and with appeals for a radical retribution of the past which are put forward by the young generation of Polish intellectuals. On the basis of the analysis of the public discourse between 2013 and 2017, the author differentiates between the retribution and reckoning dimensions of the liberal and leftist discourse, reconstructing its interpretative and argumentative structures. The discourse of 'being disappointed with the transformation' is considered a symptom of the condition of public debate in Poland.

Keywords: transformation, modernisation, public debate in Poland, liberalism, discourse analysis

Such terms as 'modernisation' and 'transformation'/'transition' have become immensely popular in Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, they are used to describe the historical process related to the downfall of communism and socialism, the introduction of the democratic system, the free-market economy, and the infrastructural development within the said part of Europe. On the other hand, these terms possess a postulative dimension, they imply a determined type of society which should be trained in the rules of democracy and capitalism. Today, transformation and modernisation in both meanings—descriptive and postulative—are the subject of public debate, both as a process which, for many, remains unfinished, and which was also based on faulty premises and led to some undesired effects. Poland in a very short period of time (2015–2018) lost the position of the transformational leader and has been labelled an unpredictable nation which gave power to right-wing and Euro-sceptical parties utilising a discourse which can be defined as populist, xenophobic, and anti-liberal. Upon close-up analysis of Polish society, it becomes clearly visible that this change is neither total in its nature nor commonly accepted. Transformation and modernisation, with their axiological and teleological vector, are the subject of a public debate whose new chapter has just opened.

According to Bogusław Bakuła, in the last half-century there have been three debates in the Polish public sphere which could be called national due to the scope and significance of their problematics: 'The first [debate] was triggered in 1980, following the birth

of the Solidarity Movement and lasted for at least a decade, the second one started after the symbolic termination of the first one and, as related to freedom regained after 1989, lasted at least until 2004 [the accession of Poland to the EU—author’s note], the third one was commenced after the 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash in Smolensk¹ and has lasted ever since’ (Bakuła 2014: 141). In the face of the current arguments over the evaluation of the transformation, it would be difficult to pronounce the second debate mentioned by Bakuła as completed. What is more, the debate is coupled with the strategic reinterpretations of the events preceding the transformation, including the Solidarity Movement, and public retributions related to the Smolensk crash. Nevertheless, it is by no means a historic debate, but a dispute on the manner in which a variously interpreted and assessed past can condition the present in Poland.

The question (*Was another modernisation possible?*) which I pose in the title of the article is a paraphrase of the title of the widely discussed 2015 book by Jan Sowa, a cultural theorist and sociologist who is a frequent guest in the Polish mass media. The main purpose of the article, however, is not to provide a direct answer to the question. As a researcher of public discourse, I am interested in the fashion in which this question is asked today, in what answers are provided, and what these replies tell us not only about the assessment of the Polish transformation, but also about the condition of public debate, the elites that participate in it, and the divisions within Polish society that it generates. In the first part of the text, I focus on the epistemic and conceptual context of the analysed dispute, including the meaning of such terms as ‘transformation’ and ‘modernisation’ in the Polish public debate. In the second part, I present the major moot points in discussions on the transformation and selected conceptualisations of the discourse on the transformation. Criticism was present in the very first stages of the democratic breakthrough, and its leaders, as early as 1989, expressed their doubts about the chosen scenario of changes. And yet it was not until 2013–2017 that we can speak of a clear break in the discourse of the successful transformation that was prevailing among the liberal and leftist elites. Besides the statements uttered by right-wing critics of the transformation and pro-Western modernisation, who support the polarising division into a so-called solidary Poland (traditionalistic) and a liberal Poland, there began to appear reckoning opinions expressed by authors who until now had distanced themselves from stern judgements in the matter, including self-criticising statements by former leaders of the democratic change. The third part is devoted to the analysis of selected texts within the liberal and leftist discourse, written between 2013 and 2017. Its purpose is to reconstruct the interpretative and argumentative structures and contexts in which these statements function, and also to ponder over the meaning of ‘disappointment with transformation’ for the legitimation of democracy and pro-Western modernisation in Poland. Inspired by the history of concepts by Reinhart Koselleck and the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD), I distinguish two dimensions of

¹ It refers to the crash of the presidential aircraft near Smolensk on 10 April 2010, among whose victims was the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, connected with the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS). Its leaders believe that the crash was a political assassination plotted by Russians (the then Polish government is alleged to have had knowledge of that), and not a result of mistakes made by the aircraft crew and flight controllers, as revealed in the course of the official investigation. In the light of the analysis of an opinion poll in Poland, in 2016 30% of respondents expressed an opinion that the causes of the crash had not been fully explained, and another 30% claimed that they had not been explained at all (Public Opinion Research Center CBOS 2016).

discourse that compete not only with the conservative and right-wing criticism of the transformation, but also with one another: the retribution and reckoning aspect of the liberal and leftist discourse.

Transformation and Modernisation: The Case of Poland

The concept of ‘transformation/transition’ (these terms are used interchangeably, but the Polish public debate speaks more often about the transformation rather than the transition) should not be treated as a neutral class of historical description. In the European context, it refers to a specific turn from Socialism and cultural ‘Eastness’ towards liberal democracy, capitalism, and cultural ‘Westness.’ Not only is the onset of the transformation a turning point in the history of the region, but also it refers to the incorporation of the post-socialist countries in the sphere of the seemingly universal history of knowledge and political culture (e.g. [Offe 1997](#)). As a result of the non-neutral perception, the transformation becomes both an *explanandum* and an *explanans* within European discourses on political change. ‘Transition does not explain but makes sense,’ claim Atila Lukić and Gordan Maslov ([2014: 219](#)). Transformation is understood as a social fact and a pass-key to explain and give sense to a series of other social facts and processes. The ontological consolidation of transformation is, however, disputable, labile, and unmeasurable in its nature, since it functions more as an ‘empty signifier’: a class of public discourse that evokes political emotions, a secret metaphor which does not refer to a permanent meaning or a *designatum* of ontic roots ([Lukić, Maslov 2014](#)). Despite that, this term is related to a rhetoric and argumentative strategy which—following Boris Buden—can be called ‘repressive infantilization’ of post-socialist societies. Although they manifested their maturity through a mostly non-violent departure from communism and socialism, they are still summoned not only to the reconstruction of political and economic institutions, but also to liberation from the mentality of a child who is untrained in democracy and citizenship. In the light of this argumentation, the period of communism is treated as an era of non-history or crippled history. It is the breakthrough of 1989 that marks out the full political birth of Central and Eastern Europe ([Buden 2010](#)).

The meaning of the transformation as a symbolic turning point in the history of Central and Eastern Europe is combined with the comprehension of modernisation processes in the region, which is partially incoherent with classical theories of modernity. In social sciences, the term ‘modernisation’ has been, for a long time, subjected to epistemological criticism as a product of the Enlightenment and originally Western thinking about history as of a linear, one-directional process of social progress made in the conditions of political democratisation and capitalistic economy (from 1980s based to a certain degree on the Washington Consensus). For instance, the influential concept of ‘multiple modernities’ by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt ([2002](#)) lists the Eurocentric dimension of the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘modernisation.’ Multiple modernities are characterised by a different dynamics and vector of social change, depending on historical and geopolitical conditionings. Differences are made particularly evident in individual public spheres, since this is where the dispute over the desired shape of modernity, society, and the political system is held. By contrast,

researchers of the temporariness of modernisation point to the asynchrony and inequality of the *acceleration* experienced by Europeans in the realm of grand historical processes, social changes and the everyday existence of individuals. Among the stimuli of acceleration, Hartmut Rosa indicates the democratic breakthrough in 1989 and the communications revolution triggered by the new media. Despite the synchronisation of the economy on a global scale, there are numerous cases of desynchronisation at the level of individual political systems, regional and local processes, and individual perspectives (Rosa 2005: 39–67). The theory of modernisation as acceleration—just like many other conceptions which are sensitive to the East European ‘stranger,’ but have been coined in Western academies—falls into a trap that it has set for itself. When differentiating between paces of modernisation, it assesses its variants in accordance with the criteria which are endogenic for the Western scenario of changes. A more radical criticism of modernity and modernisation is formulated in the postcolonial studies, by deconstructing these classes as tools for the hegemony of Eurocentric structures of explaining the reality (Sowa 2008; Seth 2016).

In the Polish context, the concept of modernisation both reveals and naturalises its Western, post-Enlightenment and progressivist genesis. It is understood not only in the Weberian sense, referring to secularisation that is conditioned by the expansion of capitalism and bureaucracy (Weber 1992), as a process of a material and infrastructural growth, but above all as an institutional and cultural adjustment to the Western-born standards of democratic and citizenly participation—the legitimacy of which was (and still happens to be) justified by the conviction of Poland’s civilizational inferiority, as expressed by the power elites, liberal and leftist intellectuals, and numerous sociologists (e.g. Sztompka 2008; Morawski 2010; Frysztacki, Sztompka 2012; see also a critical study by Kolasa-Nowak 2010). This meaning of modernisation was already present in discussions on Polish development held before the First World War and upon the independence of Poland in 1918 (Musiał 2013), however, at that time this idea did not necessarily envisage the unconditional licencing of capitalism (see Leszczyński 2013). Nonetheless, it is the 1989 breakthrough which is perceived as the accelerator of modernisation and, at the same time, as a restraint of the discussion on scenarios of changes which are alternative and not copied from the West.

With regard to peripheral countries, such as Poland, modernisation was associated, above all, with “the promise of plenty,” that is the material improvement of the quality of everyday life and the rise of consumption (Bauman 2013: 9). In second place, the aim was to efface symbolically a stigma of underdevelopment and cultural backwardness in comparison to the West of Europe—however, in the discourse of Polish intelligentsia these post-materialist goals were set as priorities on the basis of a false assumption that there were equally important for other social groups. Till the end of 1990’s post-socialist states were analysed mainly in the frames of transition paradigm that accentuated the shift from monocentric order of socialism to polycentric democracy and capitalism in a form copied from the West. Such a reductionist approach started to peter away at the turn of the century, and nowadays some researchers highlight, on the one hand, the idiosyncrasy of Polish capitalism, and on the other hand, its dependence from global economic megatrends and social policies, which prevents realisation of a fully imitative model of modernisation (see Carothers 2002). In Poland so-called ‘transition economy’ or ‘incomplete capitalism’ can be characterised by a significant equity of foreign capital, an increasing role of transnational financial institu-

tions and a distorted institutional framework, deriving from *ancien régime*, which petrifies non-transparent practices of power and wealth distribution. As a consequence, this form of capitalism should be categorised rather as a dependent market economy than a liberal one. Simultaneously, the phenomenon of path dependency creates a linkage between neoliberal solutions adopted in the beginning of transformation and the rise of unemployment in the first decade of democratic change, especially among workers and farmers, and results in low labour costs and slowly growing salaries (not until 1996 GDP in Poland exceeded its rate of 1989, in 2015 Polish GDP constituted 70% of EU average) (Jasiecki 2013: 93–99, 112–115, 277–289; Staniszkis 2003).

Changes in the labour market determined the commodification of social relations and strengthening of individualistic attitudes in the Polish society. Besides intellectual individualism which derives from left-liberal thought, an orientation broadly represented among Poles is defensive individualism—a type of particularism emerging from distrust towards state, its institutions and other people in general. Paradoxically, at the same time the expectations of welfare state policy which guarantees a wide range of public services did not decrease (Ziółkowski 2015: 159–161). Nonetheless, not only trade unions loses its meaning in the Polish labour system, but also the inter-class solidarity with various groups of interests weakens. Neither the EU membership led to even growth of civic participation among Poles. What is more, the composition of the elite has changed fundamentally—the intelligentsian ‘elite of breakthrough’ transforms into ‘the elite of consolidation’ which disposes of both political and financial capital but can be prone to corruption and clientelism (Jasiecki 2013: 159–161). The rising inequality in wealth distribution results in cultural divisions. Cultural and axiological differences within the Polish society are linked also to a decline of culture-making role of intelligentsia. Whereas higher education is an object of aspiration for various social strata, intellectual culture loses recognition in the society. As a result, also in the political discourse intellectual reasoning seems to be in decline, giving way to populist argumentation which combines anti-elitist mobilization with anti-pluralist message and Manichean morality (as Jan-Werner Müller [2016: 3] puts it: “Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people ... The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly moral”).

In consequence of the abovementioned processes, the famed postulate of ‘catching up with the West’ does not possess the status of social doxa, but it is the subject of contestation and redefinition. Modernisation from beyond, which imitates foreign solutions and their rationale, is listed as the main model applied in Poland (instead of a grassroots modernisation, initiated by various social groups, or a top-down modernisation, autonomically planned by independent authorities) and as a source of miscellaneous transformational ‘pathologies’ (e.g. an increase in social stratification, the decay of inter-generational bonds, or the Westernisation of popular culture). For a long time, there was an international or intercultural dissonance in the assessments of these processes. In the last two decades, Poland has been basically perceived, by Western liberal and leftist politicians and intellectuals, as a model illustration of a modernising post-socialist state and its democratic transformation as a political and macroeconomic success. At the same time, numerous Polish researchers—regardless of their political views—pointed to cultural blockades of the pro-Western modernisation which stemmed from the peripheral location of Poland in relation to the cultural Centre

of Europe (see [Krasnodębski 2003](#); [Zarycki 2014](#)). Nowadays, in the face of the triumph of the Eurosceptical right-wing in 2015 and the increase in xenophobic moods among young Poles, the diagnoses given by external and internal observers coincide, since they all agreeably point to cultural factors as a source of the distinctiveness of the Polish variant of modernisation (which many find surprising, but transient in its nature). However, while foreign observers wonder whether the post-socialist liberal democracy will survive the current turmoil, internal observers more often ask about the way in which this model of democracy should change under the influence of the contemporary crisis of its current shape.

Within the mainstream research on transformation and modernisation, based on a more or less overt liberal foundation, three variants of public discussion on these issues are usually distinguished. The first one is a neoliberal variant that affirms free-market rules, private property, and individualism as a source of individuals' responsibility for their own fate. This type of discourse is most often connected with pro-EU slogans, and postulates urging governments to abandon Statism-based policies. The second variant is a conservative narrative about Poland that fosters traditional values and defends its sovereignty against EU regulations. In this approach, modernisation is desired within the realm of infrastructure, industry and technology, but also understood as an axiological modernism (e.g. the expansion of rights of women and ethnic minorities, as well as religious, cultural and sexual rights) which can be a threat to the national and Catholic identity. The third variant—a social democratic one—is least commonly represented in the public debate. For a long time, postulates about following an abstract idea of common good rather than the logic of the market and expanding the portfolio of social benefits, just like in Scandinavian states, remained a niche viewpoint. The public sphere was dominated by the neoliberal narrative, and yet its conservative rival did not give ground to alternative ways of speaking about the transformation ([Anioł 2015](#)).

When seen from the conservative or republican perspective, the line of demarcation between the variants of assessing and speaking about the transformation and modernisation runs elsewhere. The conservative narrative is perceived by its propagators as a thoroughly modern project, and it nominates—as a driving force of changes—the traditionalistic cultural code, released after the downfall of Communism in Poland, and the Polish *demos*—a political community that professes national symbolic references ([Krasnodębski 2006: 205](#); [Gawin 2006: 134–137](#)). For a change, the domination of the liberal narrative is seen as a consequence of a lack of an open and 'intellectually sincere' public debate in the very first years of the transformation. A substitute of such a debate, held by the intelligentsia who despised the fusty common people, was to have promoted an imitative modernisation which marginalised the prerogatives of the national state, made Poland dependent on foreign players, and was conducted in isolation from the traditional values shared by the majority, instead of drawing inspiration from the heritage of the Polish political thought ([Kloczkowski, Szuldrzyński 2006](#)). Here, this liberal approach to tradition as a restraint of modernisation is perceived as a prolongation of the social policy applied by communists, and the axiological relativism is seen as a blockade of a just retribution of the immoral *ancien régime* ([Krasnodębski 2006: 201](#); [Gawin 2006: 130](#)).

The narrative presented today by the anti-liberal and Eurosceptical Law and Justice (PiS) government and president Andrzej Duda (former member of PiS) is not, however,

purely conservative, but a hybrid one. The representation of transition, which is dominant in the official political discourse of Poland, combines the republican idea of strong sovereign state and civic devotion for the common good with the old post-romantic vision of a nation as a substantial, homogenous entity, which unity is guaranteed by one single collective moral codex, namely, the catholic ethics (see Porter-Szüics 2014). Interestingly, in the first decade of the democratic transition Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS and the *éminence grise* of Polish authorities, was reluctant towards political readings of the Catholic Church's teaching and he inclined rather towards the republican ideas, the tradition of the National Democracy and, to a certain degree, the rhetoric of the Solidarity Movement. At that time already, he projected "a moral revolution" in Poland, claiming though, that the authorities could not create such a revolution, but could only foster a particular cultural revival of society as an ethic community. For Kaczyński and this then party, Centre Agreement (PC), transformation meant a continuation of *ancient régime*, hidden behind the facade of a free market economy and resulting from a conspiracy between former communists, intelligence and a vast part of post-Solidarity's elites, including Lech Wałęsa, whose co-worker Kaczyński once was. In 1990's Kaczyński accepted in general terms a liberal direction of economic change and efforts made for Poland's membership in NATO and in the EU (see Kaczyński 2016).

However, at the turn of the century, already as a leader of Law and Justice, Kaczyński turned towards conservative catholic electorate, especially in the provinces, where the growing consumerism of the elites evoked the sense of injustice and indignation; as well as towards young Poles (also the radical nationalist groups), the precariat and the unemployed, for whom the fight against post-communists were an abstract goal, but they reacted positively to a rhetoric of blaming the liberal elites and Western capitalists for their mediocre economic and social status. For these reasons, this narrative on transformation is adjusted for each target and the hybrid discourse is joined with patriotic slogans which constitute a device of mobilisation to defend a mass, populist and anti-elitist idea of Polishness (Krawowski 2016: 90–94). The narrative presented by the presidential centre of power also points out the growing divisions between the masses and the elites as the major failure of transition, but in comparison to main discourse of Law and Justice it is formulated in a less polarizing rhetoric.

Summing up, the keystone of all aforementioned variants of speaking about the transformation is a rhetorically capacious and instrumentalised slogan of 'social justice,' defined differently by miscellaneous variants of the modernising project. Instead of generating a commonly shared resource, references to social justice seem to create a resource of argumentation used to discredit those who see differently and who are often accused of consolidating divisions within society.

The Dynamics of the Debate on the Polish Transformation

In comparison with its previous stages, the most current variant of the debate on the transformation has a significantly more intense dimension of a) retribution and b) reckoning. This differentiation serves the purpose of contrasting the voices of those who appeal for

the transformation to be assessed and rejected since it was imposed and conducted by subjects (the West, the liberal and leftist elites, post-communist politicians, etc.) other than those who express the critique (retribution); and the voices are spoken from the perspective of participants or supporters of the changes at the turn of the 1980's and 1990's, who nowadays diagnose their unintended consequences and, to a certain extent, refer critically to their own ideological viewpoints (reckoning).

Reckoning content never appears by chance, but at a time that conditions a reflection (which is quite often emotional in its nature) upon the political and axiological layer of the collective identity. After Thomas Luckmann (1983), one can speak here about the resultant of historical, social and personal time. First of all, political impulses must appear for such critique to be formulated. In Poland, these were the repercussions of the Eurozone crisis, which may not have put a great strain on the Polish economy, but it resulted in the suppression of the pace of economic growth. In 2014, when the president and the government celebrated the 25th anniversary of the transformation, the discourse of success that accompanied the celebrations was confronted against the growing economic inequalities and the discursive division into 'winners' and 'losers' of the transformation. As early as 2013, which marked the middle of the second term of Donald Tusk's government, the critique of liberal democracy and capitalism began to be articulated in a significantly more visible manner, especially on behalf of young Poles for whom the victory over communism has never been a crucial turning point. It seems that the disappointment with the dissonance between the political discourse of success and the actual quality of life in Poland played a key role in the presidential election and then also in the 2015 election to the parliament, which were both won by Law and Justice.

The second condition is a social readiness for the reckoning conducted on behalf of a collective subject: the elites, a political class, or the whole nation. *Epochal illusions*—these long-time accumulated expectations towards social reality that are formulated from the point of view of any given group—must be depleted and reveal their own delusive nature in order to generate space for critical and self-criticising recognitions within the collective consciousness (see Barner 1987: 520–525). One of the sources of this depletion seems to be the discursive and communicative helplessness among the propagators of liberal democracy in Poland in comparison to all their national-right-wing, conservative and leftist opponents.

The third issue is the readiness of those subjected to criticism to express it. These subjects are mainly symbolic elites: public intellectuals, journalists, and politicians who are losing their respect and yet whose statements are still an important point of reference in public disputes (Czyżewski et al. 2014). The voice of the symbolic elites is conditioned by the circulation of competing discourses: the liberal discourse of transformational success and the conservative discourse of the betrayal of national interest in the course of transitions. This is superimposed by the tradition of the Polish intelligentsia's self-referencing discourse, which often focuses on criticising the nation's elites as being responsible for determining ways to modernity (see Jedlicki 1999).

The current dispute over the assessment of the transformation has near prefigurations. At times, liberal critics of the contemporary brutalisation of public debate erroneously idealise the events in 1989 and 1990 as a period of proper co-existence of pro-democratic elites and the festival of a rational public debate. As early as during the Polish Round Table Talks

(held from February to April 1989 between representatives of the Polish United Workers' Party and the opposition related to the Independent Self-governing Labour Union 'Solidarity'), there was tension between those participants who showed a more confrontative approach to the talks and those opting for more compromising solutions. A deep difference of opinion was also visible among the representatives of the opposition, since even then it was divided into various factions with disparate views on the future political and economic system in Poland. Admittedly, between 1989 and 2000, in both the liberal and right-wing discourse, there was a relatively widespread conviction that the events that had been the foundation stone of the transformation, such as the Polish Round Table Talks, including the so-called Talks in 'Magdalenka' (talks held in the village of Magdalenka by a small group of negotiators in the villa that belonged to the communist Minister of Internal Affairs) were to be assessed positively as prerequisites for a non-violent transition from communism to democracy. And yet, even then, the right-wing discourse was dominated by the critique of the so-called thick-line policy, which was the manner in which Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist Prime Minister of Poland, described the will of the new government to repudiate the responsibility for the actions of its predecessors. Numerous politicians and journalists interpreted the thick-line policy as a declaration to abstain from reproaching the *ancien régime* and, in consequence, as a circumstance that allowed ex-communist elites to continue to function and act in the democratic public sphere (Lipiński 2008: 278–284).

The lack of an unambiguous criminalisation of communist functionaries of the repressive state apparatus, the absence of a thorough and complete decommunisation of public administration bodies and institutions, and a shortage of a transparent reprivatization of goods and properties that had been nationalised by the previous regime, led to the situation in which the postulate of retribution of the communist past was channelled as a regular constituent of political rivalry, especially between 2005 and 2007, during the first term of the Law and Justice government (Ziółkowski 2014: 34). This historicisation of the public debate did not include, however, a key episode in the modern history of Poland. Namely, the deed of the Solidarity Movement was not commemorated as a canonical element of the collective memory until as late as 2008, when the European Solidarity Centre was opened in the Gdansk Shipyard, the birthplace of the trade union movement.

Nevertheless, a large number of researchers believe that the landmark event which triggered the radicalisation of the critique of the transformation process was not the inflation of disputes over the most recent history of Poland, but the corruption scandal that linked post-communist leftist politicians in power with media people. The so-called Rywin affair (named after the film producer Lew Rywin) turned out to be the first in a long series of corruption scandals and abuses of power, which were publicised in a relatively short period of time (2002–2005) and which gradually led to the crystallisation and general legitimation of opinions that negated the achievements of the Polish transformation and the system that was its fruit, i.e. the so-called Third Polish Republic. In the first years of the 21st century we were witness to a 'semantic revolution' that changed the range of vocabulary, and the manner of description, interpretation, and argumentation within the debate on the Third Polish Republic, which allegedly protected the privileges of the former communist elites (Matyja 2007). What confirms the success of the semantic change, initiated by the governing right-wing circles between 2005 and 2007, is the fact that today even the defenders

of the positive evaluation of the transformation and its left-wing critics eagerly use such terms—imposed by right-wing politicians—as ‘układ’ (an under-the-table arrangement), ‘sitwa’ (clique), or ‘kolesiostwo’ (cronyism) to refer to their opponents. Such terms activate the rhetoric of suspicion and mutual accusation of strategic motives among participants of the public sphere.

During the 8 years of the coalition government formed by the centrist Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO)² and the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL), these parties first defused the critique aimed at the Third Polish Republic and then made an attempt to mythologise and celebrate the 1989 breakthrough. A person who showed a particular involvement in the process was the PO President Bronisław Komorowski (2010–2015). Nevertheless, the attempt to overcome symbolic deficiencies related to ‘lack of a ceremonial closure of the Round Table negotiations and the lack of a dramatically staged *rite de passage* from the Polish People’s Republic to a democratic Polish Republic’ did not prevent the polarisation of the Polish elites and a gradual delegitimisation of the Third Polish Republic within the right-wing discourse (Kubik, Linch 2006: 19). According to Jan Kubik and Amy Linch (2006: 24), the way to break the impasse could have been a mnemonic reconciliation, a transgression of ‘mutually exclusive narratives of the past through public acknowledgement and integration of private memories in a negotiated publicly held *truth*.’ The inability to execute this postulate lies in the fact that the competing narratives on the transformation delegitimise not only the version told by political opponents, but also the idea of reconciliation itself (or express such a will, stipulating a series of conditions which are unacceptable to the other party).

The debate on the transformation is not really a realm to present facts and stiff indicators of modernisation, but rather a clash of explanations drawn from debaters’ experience: ‘Perception of the 1989 events is conducted through the prism of an evaluation of the whole last quarter-century, the ups and downs of the 25 years of the Polish transformation, with particular focus on its social effects, and it depends on whether the assessment is performed by the *winners* or *losers* of the Polish transition’ (Ziółkowski 2014: 25). And yet, the terms ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the transformation ought not to be treated as descriptions of ‘hard facts.’ To a great extent, they are discursive concepts used to polarise the dispute; they rather ‘parasitize’ on real inequalities within Polish society than aptly define their source. These terms play a role of self-explanatory constituents of such a definition of Poland and the Polish in the light of which the concept of transformation eventually loses its innocence.

The Transformation in the Eyes of its Critics: Methodological Remarks

The critique of the transformation and the imitative modernisation is usually associated with right-wing, traditional, and Eurosceptical viewpoints, according to which the new political system has not led to the retribution of former power elites, and the pro-Western

² Civic Platform (PO) is often described as a right-wing party due to its conservative decisions in terms of world-view issues. What differentiates it from Law and Justice (PiS), however, is the fact that it does make more or less successful attempts to balance between various political and axiological views, and therefore, it is called a centrist party in this article.

modernisation brought axiological modernism that imperils the Polish national identity. Right-wing and conservative discourses, however, are not the subject of this analysis. Principally predictable, they are characterised by a ‘modality of certainty in reference to critical assessment of the transformational processes’ (Kubala 2015: 142). In other words, they use an inbred argumentation, which is usually derived from one point of view and formulated as axiomatic judgements on the transformation and its actors. The source of the criticism of the past can be traced back in its current social effects, while the heritage of the Round Table Talks is not part of the right-wings’ resource of identity—the delegitimization of this symbolic event is more likely to be such a resource instead (Lipiński 2008: 287, 290).

The self-affirming certainty regarding the validity of one’s own convictions is also a typical feature of numerous statements within the liberal and leftist discourse. It is in this sphere, however, that the dispute over the assessment of the transformation is held nowadays, and this fact forces its participants to be more creative in terms of applied argumentation and rhetoric. The reckoning content that includes elements of self-critique formulated on behalf of the executors of the democratic change is currently present in, for instance, the recently published autobiographical books by Karol Modzelewski, Marcin Król, and Ryszard Bugaj. An ambivalent assessment of the Polish modernisation model can be found in interviews with politicians and economists who implemented market reforms, e.g. Jan Krzysztof Bielecki or Marek Belka. On the other hand, a more radical critique, deprived of the self-criticising dimension, is articulated by younger authors such as Rafał Woś, Jan Sowa and Andrzej Leder, who seek the retribution of their own intellectual circles. The opening date for the analysed discourse was set for 2013—a conventional turning point that is not related to any event that would be a landmark for Polish liberals (at that time, the country was governed by the centrists, implementing a liberal economic policy). Nevertheless, some authors began to notice the signs of an impending political crisis in Poland, which—within two years—would raise the populist right-wing party to power. One can quote here—*toutes proportions gardées*—the famous statement issued by Hegel (1991: 23) in *The Philosophy of Right*: ‘The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.’

The purpose of the analysis of the liberal and leftist discourse is a reconstruction of the most basic argumentative and interpretative strategies and structures of knowledge which are used to reinterpret the term ‘transformation’ after 25 years of its beginning, and also a reflection on the communicative effectiveness of the scrutinised discourse within in the context of the harsh political debate. The analysed corpus consists of 45 books, press articles, TV and radio broadcasts and online publications that focus on the achievements of the Polish transformation and modernisation. A qualitative discourse analysis has been performed on the corpus, inspired by selected constituents of the SKAD research programme (the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, Keller 2011) and the history of concepts (Koselleck 2006).

In the perspective which is inspired by research on the history of concepts that are constitutive for the European political culture, ‘transformation’ and ‘modernisation’ would firstly be terms whose meaning and material references depend on transitions in the social space of experience and horizon of expectation. These two categories determine the tension between the social perception of the past, which influences the experience of the

present, and expectations towards the personal and collective future, which are based both on rational premises and subjective hopes and fears. In the course of changing experiences, expectations undergo a transformation and, in consequence, the meaning of the terms that channel disappointment with unfulfilled expectations is also altered (Koselleck 1979: 354–358). Secondly, the manner in which the concepts of ‘transformation’ and ‘modernisation’ are used in the Polish public debate often implies the symbolic divisions of society into two separate groups. These divisions can be related to the category of asymmetrical counter-concepts, pairs of concepts which are seemingly universal in meaning and are used to classify people on the basis of any given criterion (Koselleck 1979: 212–213). In the context of Poland, this can be a division into Catholics and non-Catholics, anti- and post-communists, ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the transformation. Thirdly, even though the meanings of these terms are dynamic, they are characterised by a repeatable set of symbolic and argumentative references, which makes the reconstruction of the interpretative and argumentative structures justified since they demonstrate the social meaning of the terms and the vector of its change.

What must be emphasised is the research programme: the history of concepts refers to long-lasting time periods (often several hundred years long) so that the researcher could notice dynamic social processes that condition the changeability of terms used for their description. In the case of this analysis, I focus upon a very short period of time (2013–2017), which is a segment of a still brief (in Koselleck’s perspective) period of transformational critique. Thus, the approach of the history of concepts can only be applied here as a general theoretical research frame that makes the researcher more sensitive to the historicalness and relativity of classes and terms that they analyse and use. As far as the function of the source of methodological substantiation of analytic approach is concerned, I utilise the SKAD programme, the purpose of which is an empirical study of history-related issue concepts, such as circulation of knowledge and concepts in society, the emergence of their meanings, and the construction of social representations of various spheres of life, based on these concepts. Nevertheless, SKAD exceeds the scope of interest of the history of concepts within the realm of research on communication practices. This approach is a combination of inspirations taken from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge (1966) and from Michel Foucault’s discourse theory (1972). From the former, SKAD derives its interest in the social structure of knowledge and its function to construct social reality in its material and ideational dimension. From the Foucauldian approach, it takes the comprehension of discourse as historically grounded practices of ordering and naming social relationships—practices which are organised through the principles of discourse generation and nominating subjects who are entitled to utter statements. Discourse is generated through statements uttered by specific subjects, but it is not an effect of the intended actions taken by individual social actors. Instead, it is regulated by knowledge which is a medium of the power relationship. The structures of knowledge that condition discourse must be continuously updated and upgraded within the current contexts of generating the discourse, which makes it partially predictable and partially accidental. The SKAD research programme includes the analysis of statements—mainly textual in their nature—to reconstruct the dynamic order of discourse, and thus, various configurations of knowledge which condition the conflict area of social interpretations of reality (Keller 2011). SKAD desig-

nates a critical approach to researching a discourse, but it also contains a large number of gaps and generalisations that restrict a satisfying application of this approach in empirical studies. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis—focused on distinguishing strategies of generating a meaning in specified contexts, interpretative schemes, subject positions, classifications of reality, models of knowledge legitimisation and narrative structures that bind these elements—I also use author-derived categories and classes derived from a wide output of discourse analysis.

Liberal and Leftist Discourse Regarding the Transformation and Modernisation

Due to the limited length of this article, I analyse here the retribution and reckoning dimensions of the liberal and leftist discourse on the basis of contrasting examples which constitute a tiny sample of the analysed corpus. These are, however, very expressive and distinct voices which faced both positive and negative responses.

Despite the numerous rhetorical and argumentative differences between the two trends of the critique of transformation and modernisation, there are at least three issues they have in common at the metadiscursive level. The first one is a peculiar boomerang effect that shapes the debate on the transformation. I use, metaphorically, the classic category by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1943), related not only to unforeseen effects or the counter-effectiveness of political propaganda in the mass media, but also to the widespread phenomenon of unintended consequences of social activities, including communications (Mica, Peisert, Winczorek 2012: 9–28). In the analysed case, the criticised economisation of the Polish public discourse, initiated in the early stages of the transformation, translates into a relatively ‘narrow economic orientation’ (Anioł 2015: 70) even among authors who criticise the transformation, and into deterministic derivation—from macroeconomy—of a general nature of the relationship between the elites and the masses in democratic Poland.

The second one refers to the problematisation of the elites-masses relationship which is common for a large amount of the analysed content. This relationship is perceived as a source of post-transformation pathologies as well as social and economic inequalities, which raised the populist right-wings to power. The critique of the shape of this relationship (and, in particular, a lack of equiponderant communication between the leaders of the transformation and the society) unintentionally recreates the pattern of naturalising the difference between masses and elites. While the infantilisation of the masses is criticised as evidence of the liberal elites isolating themselves from the everyday life problems that people encounter, the electorate who vote for right-wings or support nationalist movements are usually demonised and portrayed as an anti-modernising force capable of leading to the exchange of elites and the breakdown of the liberal democracy in Poland.

The third issue regards the masculinisation of the transformational debate, since it is chiefly participated in by men, and it is men who articulate the problems around which the whole dispute is centred. The dominance of men among the authors responsible of reconing statements can, to a certain degree, be explained by the fact that, 25 years ago, the transformation elite consisted mainly of men and today they reflect on the choices they made in the past. The participation of women in the democratic breakthrough, even if significant

in its nature, has not been recollected until recently (e.g. [Dzido 2016](#)). Consequently, only a few female activists of that time speak publicly about the assessment of the transformation (e.g. Henryka Krzywonos, Ludwika Wujec, Grażyna Staniszevska). The younger generation is also dominated by males (the list of most prominent authors includes Sławomir Sierakowski, Jan Sowa, Grzegorz Sroczyński, Rafał Woś). Any recognised female journalists usually formulate the assessment in terms of what consequences the transformation brought for the situation of women and are significantly less likely to accept the challenge of compiling a general diagnosis of the Polish modernisation (except e.g. Karolina Wigura or Agata Szczęśniak). On the other hand, among the male authors, the woman issue is reduced to most publicised and controversial events, e.g. the conflicting issue of abortion rights in Poland.

a) The reckoning discourse. Its subjects of enunciation are usually intellectuals and more rarely the politicians who, 25 years ago, supported the liberal scenario of Polish modernisation. This discourse is conditioned by a readiness to conduct at least partial self-criticism, which—at the discursive level—translates into an interpretative and argumentative structure aimed at retelling the story of the transformation, the reinterpretation of the diagnosis of the modernisation success, and the defence of liberal democracy as an idea, through the criticism of pathology within the process of its implementation. ‘One of the principal advantages of a democratic society is its capacity for self-criticism,’ claims Gerald M. Mara ([2003: 739](#)), deriving it from Athenian democracy and recognising it as a safety valve that prevents the rise of dictatorship. In the 20th century, the practice of self-criticism was tightly interwoven with totalitarian mechanisms of ideological indoctrination. Thus, the rehabilitation of public self-criticism in the post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe is by no means an easy task either for the symbolic elites or for a researcher who uses this term. Self-criticism is a ‘suspicious’ practice since the subjects that perform it are often accused of cynicism, instrumentality, and conformism ([Nowicka 2015](#)). Despite this, however, some elements of self-criticism are revised and updated by Central and Eastern European authors who diagnose their responsibility as something which can be called an expansion of the collective horizon of expectation to the transformation, with a simultaneous lack of adequate care of shaping a positive social space of experience.

Self-criticism is present in the famous 2014 interview conducted by Grzegorz Sroczyński (*Gazeta Wyborcza*³) with Marcin Król, a historian of ideas and a participant of the Round Table Talks. In the conversation entitled *We Were Stupid (Byliśmy głupi)*, Król speaks of ‘a fiction of the free market’ which gave no sense of personal freedom to the majority of Polish society, and of a lack of ‘imagination’ among liberals, who implemented market reforms without any reflection over their social consequences. In contemporary Poland, Król diagnoses an increase in nationalistic moods and the fall of social solidarity. Significantly, he does not put the blame for the crisis of the Polish democracy on Polish society *en bloc*. He distances himself from the strategy of mentalising society, so eagerly exploited by the elites. The idea behind the strategy is to justify the failures of the power elites with the immaturity and mental underdevelopment of the whole of society, which is allegedly unable to appreciate the reforms and values promoted by the elites. On the con-

³ The largest liberal and left-wing daily in Poland, established in 1989.

trary, the author indicates that his own intellectual circles should be partially to blame for the current moods, since they got seduced by the neoliberal variant of the transformation. Even if the dichotomic classification of elites and masses is maintained (it can be compared to asymmetrical counter-concepts, since the educated elites are juxtaposed with the frustrated majority that is hostile towards them), it functions in a different narrative structure than the structure typical for the aforementioned neoliberal narrative. Król delegitimises and substitutes the individualistic argumentation (i.e. in a liberal democracy, people must take responsibility for their own fate) with the affirmation of mechanisms of social solidarity, presented as a lost value.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewee takes the position of a collective, self-criticising ‘I’ that channels the disappointment with the effects of the transformation:

We were stupid (1).

In the 1980’s, we got infected with the ideology of neoliberalism (2), and, frankly speaking, I did my share of that, inciting Tusk, Bielecki, and the whole Gdansk circle. I laboriously encouraged them to read Hayek’s works (3). We used to share the same opinions with Balcerowicz⁴, but today they have diverged (4).

That inner enthusiasm of mine just died out quite quickly. I realised that liberalism begins to be dominated by this constituent of individualism, which—in turn—pushes out other important values and kills the community (5) (Król, Sroczyński 2014).

Initially, a strong, self-critical declaration is formulated (1), which is right away neutralised by this metaphorical comparison of neoliberalism to a disease that one can unknowingly contract (2). Neoliberalism is called an ‘ideology.’ This term has an almost exclusively pejorative meaning in the Polish public discourse, whereas stigmatising neoliberalism as an ideology is derived from the leftist critique of capitalism and this form of knowledge possesses—in the analysed statement—the status of truth certified by the speaker’s personal experience. In the next sequence, the subject becomes an individual ‘I,’ listing his own actions in the past (3). However, the concession of guilt is accompanied by a reservation that the mistake made by ‘I’ belongs to the past, since today the subject is wiser (5), while some other liberals—implicitly—are still wrong (4). The guilt for the mistakes of the transformation is externalised onto the collective ‘I’ from which the individual ‘I’ (of the speaking liberal intellectual) is excluded.

We were detached from the real everyday problems that people had (1). After all, from our point of view, the whole revolution was about freedom. For example, all the hassle with censorship in communist Poland. Who was really affected by that? For 97% of the Polish, this was no nuisance at all. And for us quite the opposite—that was a major issue when they abridged or forbade you to publish a text you had so laboriously worked on. Freedom was our priority, no doubt about that. And it was enough for us. And the issues of social solidarity, poverty in the countryside, state agricultural farms, inequality... (2) We just lacked imagination (3).

At first glance, it seems that a strategy of blaming (Angouri, Wodak 2014: 544–545) was used in its self-criticising variant in the excerpt above: the collective subject there is the liberals, guilty of ignoring people’s ‘real everyday problems’ (1). Their guilt, however,

⁴ Donald Tusk is a co-founder of the Liberal Democratic Congress (Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny, KLD), and then Civic Platform (PO), and a former Prime Minister of Poland (2007–2014); Jan Krzysztof Bielecki is an economist, a co-founder of the Liberal Democratic Congress, and former Prime Minister (1991); Leszek Balcerowicz, also an economist and a former Minister of Finance, is an icon of the Polish free-market transformations in the early 1990’s.

is relativised by indicating the discrepancy between social meta-narratives: for the intelligentsia, the transformation meant freedom of speech and the end of censorship, whereas the priority of the majority was to counteract poverty and inequalities, which the leaders neglected (2). Therefore, the final statement—‘We just lacked imagination’ (3)—is not self-blaming, but self-justification performed through diagnosing the elites’ ignorance regarding social expectations. At the same time, the statement that ‘[f]or 97% of the Polish, [censorship] was no nuisance at all’ again refers to the usually impassable in liberal discourse and paternalistic classification of social actors, segregated—in accordance with the criterion of consciousness—into post-materialistic elites and common people focused on living standards and needs. Later in the interview, while listing the causes of the social failure of the transformation, Król points to the marginalisation of intellectuals and their knowledge in today’s Poland.

Despite the superficiality of this self-reckoning, numerous intellectuals from the liberal camp objected to Król’s viewpoint, denying him the right to seek reckoning of the transformation on their behalf. One of the reasons for that cold reception was the ambivalent collective ‘I’ used in the interview. An ideal type of this position of the subject would be an inclusive collective ‘I,’ i.e. the I-author of the self-critique + you-members of the same community as the author. In Król’s interview, self-criticism conducted from the position of the inclusive collective ‘I’ gives up its place to self-criticism performed from the position of an exclusive collective ‘I’ which privileges the author to self-criticism as more mature, perspicacious and critical than those he speaks of—therefore, he performs this self-reckoning on their behalf. I call this type of statement an enlightened self-criticism. It reappears—in its more paternalistic form—in Król’s book entitled *We Were Stupid (Byliśmy głupi, 2015)*, which elaborates on the theses contained in the interview.

The argumentative ineffectiveness of Król’s statements also stems from their retrospective and utopian tone. According to Król, the remedy for the disturbing political crisis is the return of intellectual knowledge to the sphere of politics, i.e. maintaining the traditional hierarchy of knowledge in the era of its anti-intellectual relativisation. The legitimacy of this postulate is, after all, partially undermined in liberals’ reckoning narrative itself. ‘And why should we actually believe Król? Since—as he himself admits—he was so wrong about his former fascinations. Why wouldn’t he be wrong again today? What evidence do we have that certifies he has really got wiser?’ asks Paweł Dybel (2015: 335), another liberal intellectual. It seems that this ascertainment can not only refer to the analysed case, but also to the current crisis of intellectuals’ morality within the Polish public debate.

When published, the interview with Król might have triggered numerous disputes and disagreements. First of all, the opponents of self-reckoning defend an interpretative frame according to which transformation was a huge success, especially in matters of macro-economic development of Poland and the rise of its significance in international relations (mainly in the region). In turn, a partial acceptance of Król’s critique of social aspects of transition is weakened by emphasising emotionality in Król’s rhetoric and imputing him dramatization and hiperbolization of the presented diagnosis (Smolar, Michalski 2014). Moreover, Król as well as leftist, much more radical critics of the transformation are accused with making liberals a scapegoat, blaming liberalism for being a source of all socio-economic problems and with abandoning or even incomprehension of the essence of liberal

democracy. The evaluation of the transition reduced to a material dimension may bring the leftist critics closer to the discourse of the ruling right-wing party and may distance them from the fight for fundamental democratic values, such as freedom from repressive political power. Paweł Śpiewak, social scientist and public intellectual, claims that, “one can have an impression that young leftists are simply bored with freedom. It is for then something so obvious that they are not able to appreciate nor to understand it” (Śpiewak 2016: 26).

However, in 2017, the scheme of interpretation which points to the elites’ illusive fascination with neoliberalism as one of the main causes behind the transformational pathologies during the early stage of democratic transitions, constitutes a permanent element of the new, moderately critical, liberal and leftist narrative on the 1989 breakthrough. The narrative does not reject the pro-Western variant of modernisation, but it lists the features of its unfinished nature. Provoking interlocutors to perform self-criticism is a strategy which was turned by Grzegorz Sroczyński, well-known left-liberal journalist, into ‘a trademark’ of his press and radio interviews with politicians, economists as well as former anti-communist activists (e.g. Michał Boni, Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, Andrzej Celiński, Jerzy Hausner, Karol Modzelewski, Jerzy Osiatyński, Aleksander Smolar) (Sroczyński 2015, 2017). Besides self-criticism performed by the elite of breakthrough, a similar bitter reflection can be found in Jacek Hugo-Bader’s reportages in which he presents his former colleagues, anti-communist activists as ‘losers’ of the transformation, highlighting the ambivalence of transitions’ outcomes in the eyes of its former followers (Hugo-Bader 2016).

What returns though with this liberal critical or even self-critical narrative is the strategy of infantilisation and mentalisation of the masses, which at this time is used as the elites’ self-defence mechanism. For instance, Jerzy Baczyński, the editor-in-chief of *Polityka* (the best-selling liberal and left-wing weekly in Poland), when interviewed on the radio in 2017 in relation to the 60th anniversary of the periodical, said: ‘We believed that this neoliberal wave around Balcerowicz, which at that time swept through the Polish economy like a tsunami, was really necessary. We did think there was no other way to abandon that extreme nationalisation, but to move towards liberalism. And yet we also yielded to the illusion that looks even more illusive today. We believed that if we implemented models and organisational methods taken from Western societies ... our society would also adjust to it, and in about 10–15 years—when we assumed the transformation would be over—we would also have a mature society, just like its Western counterparts’ (Baczyński, Lizut 2017).

b) The retribution discourse. It contains statements issued by younger authors, who play the role of accusers of the transformation leaders. On the one hand, these are publicists and academics connected with leftists journals, e.g. “Krytyka Polityczna,” “Nowy Obywatel” or the Polish edition of “Le Monde diplomatique”. Within this intellectual discourse of social critique, these authors attempt at retelling the genesis, course and results of the transformation by means of notions and argumentative structures borrowed from Western Critical Theory, in particular from post-Marxism and post-colonialism. On the other hand, in the Polish politics, besides already existing left-wing formations, new actors have emerged, namely urban social movements and the Together Party formed before the 2015 parliamentary elections. Their main discursive strategy consists in pointing out income and property inequalities generated by neoliberal logic approved in the 1990’s. However, due to the ambivalent evaluation of communism and metropolitan character of the political pro-

gramme, on a nationwide scale the new left-wing formations cannot win with the anti-elitist right-wing discourse. Finally, retribution of the transformation is articulated by well-known journalists of leftist and liberal media, who pass the intellectual and economic arguments to large audiences in non-hermetic, plain but often exaggerated form.

Here, I shall focus upon two authors: Rafał Woś, an economic journalist working for *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* and contributor to *Polityka* since 2015, the author of two books—*A Childhood Disease of Liberalism (Dziecięca choroba liberalizmu, 2014)* and *This Is Not a Country for Employees (To nie jest kraj dla pracowników, 2017)*, and Jan Sowa, a culture theorist and a sociologist, the author of the 2015 non-academic work entitled *Another Polish Republic Is Possible! (Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa!)*. As far as economic issues are concerned, they represent both the leftist viewpoints that are meant to differ from opinions articulated by market liberals and the right-wing disparagement of the Third Polish Republic.

The generational gap between these authors and Król and his coevals results not only in the radicalisation of the language and argumentation of the former, but it is also quoted in their statements as an accreditation of their retribution voice (1), neutralised by means of common-sense knowledge of the perpetuity of the generation gap and conflicts (2):

Since I was born later, it is easy for me to write these words, but I see no reason whatsoever why I should not do so (1). That's what the world is about—subsequent generations come and irritate the older by asking such questions as: 'How could you let that happen?' We will also be followed by another generation who is going to do exactly the same thing (2) (Woś 2014: 284).

In terms of generating meaning, the strategy of antagonisation of debate and personalisation of accusations plays a crucial role. In this case, however, the antagonisation does not simply mean a straightforward polarisation of the dispute, since the younger generation of critics does not recreate the classical division between *us* (society) and *them* (the elites). Instead, it promotes another classification: *you—them—us*. Former mentors (*you*) are compared to the current power and business elites (*them*) so as to point out negative similarities between the two groups. At the end of this triad, there is the ignored society on behalf of whom the new intellectual elites (*us*) speak, unburdened with 'the original sins' of the democratic transformation. At the same time, the personalisation of the dispute is related to creating a catalogue of intellectuals and politicians accused of betraying their own ethos and of a zealous support of aggressive market reforms in the very first years of the Third Polish Republic. The same issue that Król discussed evasively, by means of the generalising and fuzzy 'us,' Sowa formulates as both a general (1a) and personal (1b) charge of actions that generate nearly dehumanising economic inequalities (2):

Besides a few notable exceptions, such as Tadeusz Kowalik and Karol Modzelewski, the whole intellectual elite of the 1980's that was involved in 'the protection of the working class' (1a)—including Adam Michnik, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Bronisław Geremek, and even Jacek Kuroń, who had always taken pride in his leftism (1b)⁵—supporting and actively participating in the implementation of the plan of the transformation of the Polish economy, which intentionally and purposefully condemned a large segment of society to the scrapheap (2) (Sowa 2015: 167).

In terms of interpretative schemes and argumentation, we will not find any innovative strategies in the works by Woś and Sowa. The social and economic problems of Poland are

⁵ Sowa lists names of intellectuals and, at the same time, former activists of the anti-communist opposition who played a crucial role in the process of shaping a new political and economic system of democratic Poland.

compared metaphorically to a disease, and liberalism to a foreign body that destroys the social tissue. Woś writes about ‘a Polish liberreliosis,’ ‘brutal liberalism,’ and ‘Pol-liberalism,’ while Sowa calls Poland ‘a mutilated body,’ and writes about ‘an eastern anomaly’ and ‘Polish pseudo-liberalism.’ In both cases, arguments supporting this negative assessment are formulated within the modality which unmasks myths related to such economic phenomena as privatisation, low labour costs, so-called junk contracts, government debt, trade unions, and foreign investments, etc. Indicating the sources of the exclusiveness of the Polish modernisation (the exclusion of regular employees from the division of profits within the developing economy), Woś focuses on short-term and static diagnoses, recognising the first symptoms of ‘poisoning with’ economic liberalism in the mid 1980’s, following the suppression of the ‘Solidarity’ ethos and prior to the Act on Economic Activity, commonly referred to as the Wilczek Act, which was passed at the end of the socialism era⁶. On top of that, Sowa adds elements of long-term processual divagations on the postcolonial condition of Poland and modernisation barriers originating in the 17th century (comp. [Franczak 2014](#)). Regardless of whether the author of the critique is a journalist or an academic scholar, the list of inspirations on how to repair the transformation is similar and hybrid in its nature, including: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, as well as Polish Keynesian economists Tadeusz Kowalik and Michał Kalecki, and a currently popular representative of ‘intellectual import’—Thomas Piketty. The leftist knowledge, to a large extent Western-based, constitutes a handy ideological resource for Polish critics of capitalism, a resource which is mechanically applied to the Polish reality.

A significant aspect of these ‘patricidal’ texts is their ambivalence of the assessment of both communism and the West. Not only do those who were ‘born later’ whitewash communism, indicating that it led to a major change of the social structure in Poland, but also they almost claim that some elements of the former reality would be worth patterning as long as they have been filtered through the Western theory of criticism. Sowa uses it to reread Marx and Lenin, presenting ‘Solidarity’ as the best fruit of communism:

Not only was ‘Solidarity’ an anti-communist movement (...) but it also constituted a communist event in itself, *par excellence*. ‘Solidarity’ challenged the system, and yet the nature of the challenge was quite paradoxical, since the movement was, after all, a product of the very same system. One could go even further and say: ‘Solidarity’ was the greatest success of the Polish People’s Republic and the governing Polish United Workers’ Party ([Sowa 2015: 177](#), author’s own emphasis).

Woś ([2014: 266](#)) does not go that far, but he argues that life in the West is better than in Poland ‘due to the frequently derided social benefits that our liberal elites object to with the same eagerness as the communist apparatchiks objected to jazz music in Stalinism.’ While criticising the neoliberal model of the free-market and the imitative modernisation of Poland, both authors simultaneously mythologise the West as a source of alternative economic and intellectual ideas. For Sowa, the western leftist knowledge is a path to a better version of communism than its former Eastern European counterpart.

The liberal and leftist discourse is based on a paradox. On the one hand, the transformation is portrayed as an unsuccessful social experiment, whose originators—instead of

⁶ This act validated numerous forms of economic and business activity; its name stems from the surname of Mieczysław Wilczek, the last communist Minister of Industry.

searching for an autonomous path of transitions—erroneously selected a neoliberal model, postulating the adjustment of the Polish economy and society to Western standards. On the other hand, this idealised autonomous path would also have been—at least partially—founded upon Western knowledge and social practice (critical towards neoliberalism). The imitiveness of modernisation alternatives is not problematised here. What is more, it is an elitist discourse within which expressive argumentation and imagery, colloquial lexis, and classification of assessment disguise the elitism of its content and subjects. The provided blend of leftist radicalism, the lack of unambiguous critique of communism, and the commendation of liberalism within the sphere of axiology does not render this discourse convincing to a broad audience in Poland. The limited space of experience among younger authors, which stems from the fact that they were ‘born later,’ translates into a wider horizon of expectation than in the case of authors of the reckoning discourse (comp. [Koselleck 1979: 374](#)). Neither, however, meets the expectations of the Polish majority, where liberals and leftists unavailingly seek support.

Summary

The multi-source critique of the effects of the political and economic transformation, and the related model of modernisation, is a symptom of the fragility of validation of the liberal democracy in Poland. An ambiguous assessment of the consequences of the democratic transitions also stems from the manner in which—in the course of the ongoing political dispute—the dominating meanings of terms used by the elites in the public debate are changed. There is a noticeable tendency for a significantly less common application of ‘transformation’ as a purely descriptive term, referring to a closed chapter in the modern history of Poland. For numerous participants of the current public debate, the transformation remains an unfinished process. In the light of conservative and right-wing viewpoints, this process—appropriated by liberals and leftists—ought to be either completed by others or symbolically cancelled and performed from scratch, upon the retribution of the post-communist elites. At the same time, liberal and leftist voices suggest a correction of the transformational vector by including postulates of egalitarianism, or by its fundamental remodelling and exclusion of neoliberal solutions. Modernisation is understood in an equally ambivalent manner. According to some, it only defends itself as an infrastructural and technological development that does not violate the backbone of traditional, conservative social norms. In turn, liberal and leftist circles recognise the greatest weakness of the Polish modernisation as a scant transition of attitudes and values (i.e. modernisation without axiological modernism, as argued by Sowa). Nevertheless, even among these circles there is no consent as to how deep the liberalisation of social life in its ethical dimension should be (see [Szacki 1994: 11–14](#)).

The reckoning debate is also an unintended fruit of what is being criticised today—an imitative Western model of modernisation. The responsibility for the unsatisfying state of affairs is simultaneously attributed to both internal and external actors, and the critique of liberalism is not only a criticism of the condition of Polish democracy, but also Western European values perceived as a certain ideal to which Central and Eastern Europe is to

aspire. On the one hand, the West ceases to be an idea that must be caught up with and followed mandatorily. On the other hand, for both older and younger critics, the Western experience still remains a modernisation model for Poland, whose society perceives itself as one that needs a mental change.

When addressing the title question: *Was another modernisation possible?*, numerous participants of the public debate answer in the affirmative way, rarely problematising the epistemic status of the query. As long as the local and global ideological horizon of the late 1980's is not taken into account, this question remains speculative and purely theoretical, since it was a time when neoliberalism and individualism monopolised the European market of ideas, emphasising the cons of Socialism. As recalled by Włodzimierz Anioł (2015: 83), 'the post-communist transformation in Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe would have looked quite different if it had not started in 1989, but e.g. 20 years earlier, in 1969 during the golden age of the welfare state in Europe.' Also, the debate on the transformation looked different 20–25 years ago than it does today. The public debate—even if more deformed and radical at the linguistic level—has generally become more proximal and self-referencing, despite the increasing concerns on the global political stage.

Current diagnoses include often a remark that modern Polish history is retold afresh. The previous manners of its interpretation are nearly exhausted when confronted with alternative narratives whose claim to dominate the public discourse also seems to be doomed to failure. As stated by literary scholar Przemysław Czapliński (2016: 399), '[t]here is no up-to-date narrative on the presence of Poland in Europe, a narrative adequate towards the cumulative problems [of Europe and Poland]'—this narrative is still to be written. The search of the way to talk about the success and failure of the transition that would integrate the Polish diverts attention from the fact that, in today's Poland, the diagnosis of the lack of such a narrative, or superiority of one narrative over the others, constitutes a subject of dispute itself.

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